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Washington Merry-Go-Round

by JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON — A prominent ad agency broke off its campaign to help Senator Jim Eastland's rival in Mississippi's Democratic primary after the agency was promised it might get a cut of President Nixon's lucrative campaign advertising.

Eastland, of course, is the Senate Judiciary chairman who bailed out Richard Kleindienst, the President's choice for attorney general, during the ITT hearings. Before the first witness was heard, Eastland declared his faith in Kleindienst and, thereafter, steered him helpfully through the stormy hearings.

Eastland was also the lone Democrat who voted with the Republicans, in the end, to shut off the hearings to avoid any more embarrassing testimony.

Yet, despite the appearance of a blatant political deal, the parties to it insist it can all be explained away as fast as you can say ITT.

Here are the facts:

Taylor Webb, a moderate Leland, Miss., lawyer, decided early this year to run against the owlish Eastland, whose power in the Senate is based on 30 years seniority.

Webb resisted pressure to keep out of the race and announced his candidacy. He then sought an advertising agency to handle his campaign, but four in a row turned him down.

He was compelled, finally, to go out of the state for help, and he signed up the respected Houston firm of Culberson, Heller and Norton.

"Before I signed with these people, I asked if they knew what they were getting into," Webb told my associate Les Whitten. "Bob Heller and Jim Culberson both said they did."

Webb advanced the agency $7,500. The Houston firm cashed the check and started producing TV spots. On April 15, they were still working loyally for Webb against Eastland when peppery Sen. John Tower, R-Tex., one of their key clients, flew into Houston.

It's an open secret in Washington that Tower is an errand boy for the White House. He notified the Houston ad agency that if they wanted to stay in his good graces, they would have to drop Webb.

Earlier, Tower had promised the agency to seek the Texas contract for President Nixon's campaign with its millions in billings. This, too, was in the balance.

As one of the partners, Ed Norton, explained to us: "Tower told us months earlier he would try to get us the presidential business. We felt that before, during and after (the meeting with Tower), he intended to help us."

Tower told us that he had reaffirmed his commitment to the young agency at the meeting. "I said I would try to get some of the Nixon business for them but I'd have done that for them anyway," he advised us.

Within 24 hours of Tower's warning to the agency, another partner, Bob Heller, was on the phone with an outraged Taylor Webb. Recalls Webb: "Heller told me he was going to withdraw from my campaign at the direction of Senator John Tower. Heller said that Tower did not want them 'involved in Mississippi in a campaign against Senator Eastland.' " Heller denied to us that he had mentioned Eastland's name.

What makes this all the more curious is that Tower is a Republican and Eastland a Democrat. Normally, Republicans don't help Democrats to win re-election to the Senate.

The ad agency put out the story that they had dropped the Webb account solely because they were too busy with the Tower campaign. But the agency knew how busy they would be before they signed on with Webb.

We have now discovered that agency partner Norton, after begging off Webb's campaign allegedly because of too much work, flew secretly to Washington on April 27 to seek Nixon's political advertising. In short, Norton went to Washington to see that Nixon's advertising team delivered on Tower's promise.

Norton talked to the "November Group," as the Nixon advertising team is called. He spoke to the group's executive vice president, Phil Joanou, who works under the direction of former Attorney General John Mitchell.

Mitchell also was handled with great gentleness by Senator Eastland during the ITT hearings.

Joanou promised to consider the Houston agency when it comes time to dish out the advertising accounts.

Footnote: Joanou, Norton, Heller, Tower and Eastland all insist they were not party to any deal. Norton specifically denied persistent reports that Fred LaRue, a former White House aide and now special assistant to Mitchell, had joined Tower in putting heat on the Houston agency to drop the Webb account. LaRue, an old friend of Eastland, couldn't be reached. Tower, in a chat with us from Texas, stoutly denied that the White House had asked him to act in Eastland's behalf. Tower said that when Webb threatened to sue the ad agency, he told them to go along and take Webb's account. Eastland, himself, cautious as an old bear, commented: "Hell, I don't know a thing about it. If John Tower was doing something for me, I think he would have talked to me about it."